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Dorothy McCullough Lee: "Do-Good Dottie" Cleans Up

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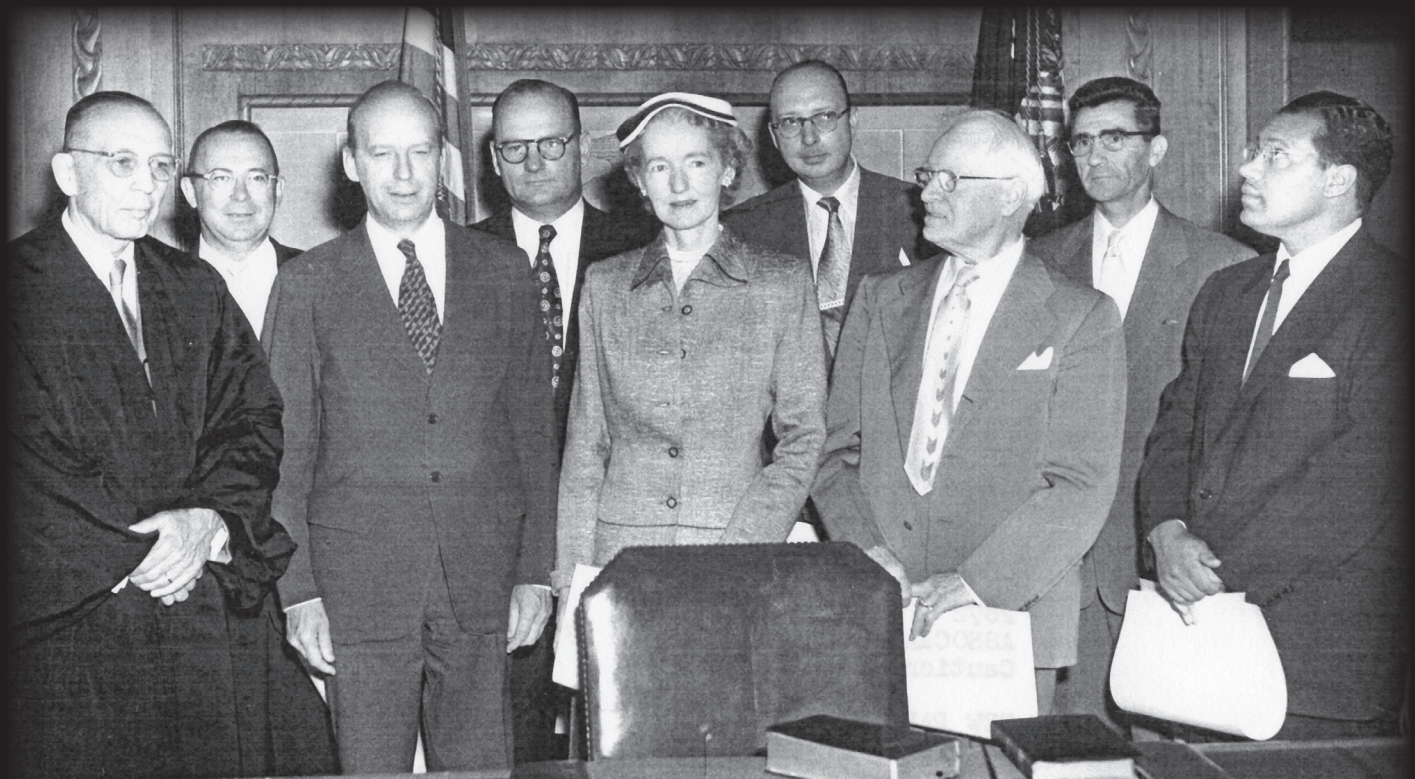
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Dorothy McCullough Lee

"Do-Good Dottie" Cleans Up

A new and expanded U.S. parole board poses August 7th during the Eisenhower administration, after being sworn in. From left to right: front, Judge Harold Stephens who officiated; Attorney General Herbert Brownell; Mrs. Dorothy McCullough Lee, Portland, OR; James Johnston, San Francisco; Scovel Richardson, St. Louis, MO; rear, Dr. George Killinger, Marion, VA; Dr. Raul W. Tappan, Tenafly, NJ; George J. Reed, St. Paul, MN; Richard Chappell, Jeffersonville, GA.
Associated Press Photo, OrHi # 2872.

by Meryl Lipman

Across the metroscape, people are talking about Hillary. *Willamette Week* reports breathlessly on the latest VIP Democrat to endorse her presidential candidacy. The prolific bloggers and would-be insiders at Blue Oregon and Daily Kos opine about her voting record, her merits versus detractors, her appeal (or lack of appeal) to Oregonians, and her chances of actually winning.

Among the questions they're asking: Is Hillary Clinton too controversial? Is she too conservative? Is America ready for its first woman president? And, if elected, could she effectively stamp

out corruption in Washington, thus restoring our country to its former integrity, if not glory?

As 2008 promises all kinds of election excitement, an instructive piece of local history may provide parallels, if not answers, to the Hillary questions. Indeed, not too long ago Portlanders were raising similar concerns about another pioneering female politician, one who also promised great change should she be elected to the city's top office.

Portland in 1947 was a dirty town. A port city crawling with gambling halls, strip joints, seedy bars and brothels, the City of Roses offered every ad-

diction known to man. Bookies set up shop on 4th and Morrison. Dealers sold opiates in Chinatown. On SW 3rd, the legendary Tart's Row, a romp with a prostitute cost \$10. A sweet-faced, redheaded madame called Little Rusty entertained local cops and Supreme Court justices. Mafia-controlled abortion racket brought women streaming in from Seattle and California. Violence and venereal disease ran so high that sea captains refused sailors liberty time to carouse in Portland. Crime rings, both local and out-of-state, paid police and politicians to stay off their scent. Rumor had it Portland's mayor, Earl Riley, skimmed off the protection money collected by police, estimated at \$60,000 a month, and hid it in a vault next to his City Hall office.

On the night of January 14, 1947 Captain Frank Tatum anchored the Navy ship USS Edwin Abbey in Portland, walked up the gangplank and headed for Cecil's Rooms, a bar on 6th Avenue. Huddled in his coat as temperatures dropped to the teens, he checked his platinum, diamond-studded watch and puffed with pride. The piece was worth \$1800. In his pocket he had \$700, enough for a thorough perusal of Portland's nightlife. As Tatum imbibed and flashed his watch, Cecil's owner, Patrick O'Day,

A port city crawling with gambling halls, strip joints, seedy bars and brothels, the City of Roses offered every addiction known to man.

saw an opportunity. An argument ensued but 52-year old Tatum was no match for ex-prizefighter O'Day, who beat him brutally and told his boys to "get rid of him." Two of Cecil's employees lugged the semi-conscious Tatum to a car, drove into the hills above Northwest Portland, and tossed him off a 50-foot cliff.

The body was found five days later. The watch and \$700 were gone. Tatum's murder shocked residents out of complacency. Portland's City Club began researching the Rose City's depravity. Ultimately, the 1,000-member civic organization pointed its long, elegant finger at Riley and police.

While Portland's public officials were small fish in a sea of nationwide syndicates, rotting city government, in cahoots with local law enforcement, had enabled organized crime to flourish. Portland residents were fuming.

Into this maelstrom strode Dorothy McCullough Lee. Disgusted by the vice industry, Portland's



"Let's really be brothers" — Mayor Dorothy McCullough Lee signs a proclamation setting February 19th to 26th as Brotherhood week as Dr. Morgan S. Odell (left) and Adolph L. Block, committee members, look on. OrHi [no negative number].

Commissioner of Public Utilities began doing some research of her own. Testing the waters for a 1948 mayoral bid against Riley, she swore that, if elected, she would enforce the law. Influential ears perked up.

No stranger to law or politics, Lee, an attorney, had served 14 years in the Oregon House of Representatives and Senate. In 1943 she left Salem to join the Portland City Commission. She was about to become Portland's first woman mayor, and only the second woman in the United States to hold a city's top office.

Lee seemed an unlikely heroine. Gray-blue eyes peered out like half moons under strange, ornate hats as she stood erect at 5'4." She weighed in at 110 pounds. Straight posture, a sharp nose and prim mouth suggested a 47-year old Schoolmarm, stalwart, efficient, but ultimately harmless. The question arose: could the thin, gray-haired wife of a Standard Oil executive battle Portland's underworld and win?

Dorothy had decided long before that she would not be hamstrung by gender, and that sex had no place in politics. At age 13, she leaned over the rail of the U.S. Senate Gallery, where her father, Navy Rear Admiral Frank McCullough, had been summoned to Washington. Listening to the women's suffrage debate, a horrified Dorothy realized she might not get the right to vote. She kept her eye on the issue, which passed into national law in 1920. She became a lawyer in 1924 and, arriving in Portland the same year, she opened the first all-female law practice in Oregon, with a fellow attorney Gladys Everett.

As the lone woman in both the Oregon Legislature and on Portland's City Commission, she refused to see "woman" and "political leader" as mutually exclusive.

As City Commissioner, Lee had dealt mostly with infrastructure. She'd convinced the local traction company into updating the streetcar and bus system, to the tune of \$1,500,000, and she implemented a successful mosquito-control program. Citizens knew her as an effective administrator.

Still, she debated whether she was the person for the mayor's office. Sensing her passion and her indecision, City Club and other organizations turned up the heat on Lee. A phone call from a female civic leader upset her. "The mothers of Portland are looking to you, Dorothy," the woman said, knowing Dorothy had two adopted children.

Days before the March 12, 1948 filing deadline, Dorothy sat in her parked car at Union Station.

High clouds moved across the sky and W. Scott Lee, her burly, big-faced husband of 24 years shifted in the seat beside her, ready to leave on a business trip. She was still torn, she said, and Scottie gave her his final thoughts. He told her, personally, he wouldn't want the job, "under any circumstances," and he did not envy her the campaign. But, given the issues and people urging her on, he did not think she had much choice. He kissed her goodbye, got out of the car and entered the station to catch his train.

At 8:36 p.m. March 12, while dining at a friend's house in San Francisco, Scott received a telegram:

"Prepare to hang onto your hat when you come home. I filed for Mayor Thursday and Riley filed today along with seven little known candidates. Have written an announcement story for Sunday papers. I need publicity agent badly also ghost writer. Will you apply for job? Love Dorothy."

He replied immediately:

"Have wired my hat fast. I apply for both jobs. Will expect no additional compensation for occasional overtime. Home Sunday 11:30. Love Scottie."

Dorothy had little need for campaign management. Fed up with Riley, Portland's citizenry ousted him in the May 21, primary giving Lee 85,045 to Riley's 22,510 votes, and an eight-month transition before assuming the position.

In January 1949 she took office and rolled up her sleeves. Within two weeks she hired Charles Pray, former head of the Oregon State Police, a man known for his honesty, as her new police chief. Lee declared that "slot machines and other corrupting devices would be repressed." She used police to pull the offending machines. Within three days, a Press Club member paid her a visit. The Press Club slot machine provided \$50,000 in annual revenues, the man said. Its removal would cause the club significant hardship. Lee turned to a red book of Oregon codes; the man reminded her of his large contribution to her campaign. She sat behind the large desk in the mayor's office, her alabaster face impassive, and thumbed through the book. Finally she looked up and said, "The law merely says slot machines are illegal. It doesn't make a distinction between



gentlemen's clubs and the corner beer tavern. Slot machines are illegal in Oregon."

The man sat, dumbstruck.

Within months she had raided Chinese gambling joints, earning her the nickname, "No Sin Lee." She and Pray closed downtown card rooms.

son, as reported by The Oregonian: "An onerous and inequitable financial burden upon the workers and business people of Portland."

Dorothy responded, citing sore losers, but wrote in a statement, "To file a recall petition against any public official is, of course, the privilege of any group of citizens under the Democratic Form of Government."

She added that she "would not want to serve as Mayor of Portland any longer than the majority of our people wish me to be their chief executive."

As residents and civic organizations supported their mayor, the recall attempt faltered. October 1949 showed her approval rating at 66% and, by November, recall ringleader attorney Maxwell Donnelly sent her a peace offering, a dozen roses, with the note, "I was only foolin'." Dorothy refused the bouquet.

Her troubles did not end there. Former Mayor Riley continued running a payoff racket from his Packard dealership and, since Lee was unable to shut out national crime rings organized by the Seattle Teamsters Union, debauchery did not pull up stakes and leave town altogether.

Meanwhile, downtown businesses closed and city revenues plummeted (partly as a result

of Mayor Lee's vice-fighting tactics).

Additionally, Lee's introduction of business taxes and school levies failed, as did

Housing Authority of Portland's bid to build 2,000 low-rent apartments. Her intro-

duction of a civil rights bill alienated her from an inherently segregated town.

During her years as mayor, Lee cleared downtown congestion, implementing the current grid of one-way streets. She was a friend to women, minorities and the poor, but she was largely ineffectual in Portland's top office.

Obsessed with morality, she neglected the business community and refused to play politics. Lee



Could the thin, gray-haired wife of a Standard Oil executive battle Portland's underworld and win?

Mayor Dorothy McCullough Lee with Portland city commissioners.
OrHi #CN008915-0317P082.

They removed pinball machines. In 1949 and 1950 they shut down burlesque houses, brothels and The Music Hall, a homosexual club boasting female impersonators.

Mobsters moved away and the vice industry suffered. Downtown businesses also languished, their property values declining, and in September 1949, a coalition of 10 disgruntled businessmen sought to recall Mayor Lee from office. The rea-

interpreted the law in minutiae, overlooking legal race tracks and dog parks, causing many to question her consistency, and even the law itself. Thus she became a laughingstock, dubbed “Dottie-Do-Good,” chided for her funny hats and otherwise marginalized.

In 1952 she sought reelection but, backed by the business community, Fred Peterson ran against her and won. Dorothy McCullough Lee left City Hall and Portland was back in business.

Among the signs of the relapse was California stripper Tempest Storm's purchase of the Capital Theater in 1953 where she headlined shows. Also by 1955 Portland had succumbed to a mob war, Seattle Teamsters fighting local kingpins to control the city. In 1957 a national vice probe called three Portland witnesses to testify before the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor and Management Field in

Washington, DC. Among those subpoenaed was new Portland Mayor Terry Schruck, accused of taking bribes from bootleggers in his previous job as sheriff. Though Schruck remained popular after his questioning, Portland was embarrassed by the national attention and organized crime lost its hold on the City of Roses.

But Dorothy McCullough Lee had long since moved on to Washington, DC where she served on the National Parole Board and the controversial red-hunting Special Committee on Subversive Activities. She returned to Portland in 1962 to teach at PSU and resume practicing law.

By all accounts, Dorothy Lee was an honest politician. In 1943, as a state senator and candidate for senate president, she faced a tied vote, 15 to 15. Lee conceded, explaining that she “could not, in the interests of the state, allow the deadlock to continue any longer.” The only argument against her had been her gender. In wartime, senate president is next in succession to the governor and opponents believed a woman could not be governor in wartime. Ex-Governor Charles Sprague later clucked at the premise. He had no doubt Lee

could have governed the state and commanded the state guard through World War II.

Additionally, she eschewed partisan politics and, as a Republican in the Oregon Senate, she often supported traditionally Democratic causes, including free textbooks for schoolchildren and funding for low-income housing. As she told an interviewer on women’s radio show in 1948, recapping her years in Salem, “You couldn’t really tell who was a Democrat and who was a Republican unless you already knew.”

History tends to reward honorable public servants, even when they fail to deliver expected miracles. Though by all accounts Lee was a better legislator than a mayor, few newspaper articles criticize her. Ex-Governor Tom McCall called her “a real lady, with an iron will,” and ex-Senator Richard L. Neuberger said Portland would have been spared humiliation by the Senate Committee had Dorothy remained mayor.

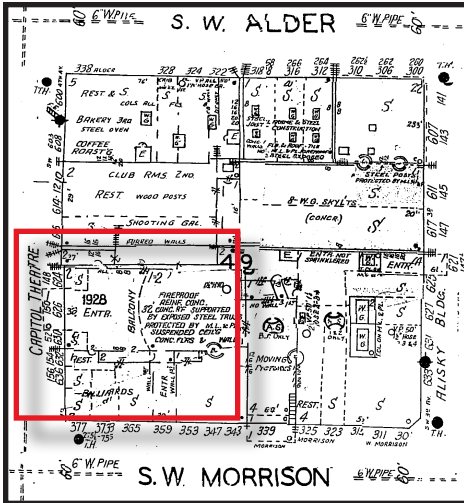
While Lee, who died in 1981, may have been

History tends to reward honorable public servants, even when they fail to deliver expected miracles.

conservative, she was also ahead of her time. The Mafia left Portland in the early 1960s, 10 years after her failed reelection bid; civil rights took root in the same era. Women’s equality movements blossomed in the late 60s as well.

While it remains to be seen whether America is ready for its first woman president, or whether Hillary is the appropriate woman for the job, Dorothy McCullough Lee earned a legacy of admiration for planting the seeds of Portland’s transformation, and also because she showed more interest in fulfilling her platform than in acquiring or retaining power. And, though her staunch devotion to her original promise cost her a second chance at City Hall, she bore no grudges. Quoting Abraham Lincoln to her husband during the 1949 recall campaign, she said, “As long as you are of any use or value to the community, you cannot expect to be free of abuse and criticism.” **M**

Meryl Lipman is a Portland area freelance writer.



The Capital Theater at S.W. 4th and Morrison. Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map, 1950.